

## Report of the General Secretary

Cry. Cajole. Critique. Encourage.

All of these possibilities went through my mind as I reflected on this last address to the General Synod as your general secretary.

All are options that flow from the deepest places of my heart. All are emotions that battle for supremacy in my thoughts, feelings, and actions standing before you this morning

We stand at a critical time in our existence as the Reformed Church in America. I do not mean to be overly dramatic. I do not desire to create a false sense of urgency. I do want us to comprehend the gravity and importance of the moment. I do want us to understand the responsibilities we have before God and on behalf of our church as we gather in assembly to discern the Holy Spirit's leading for our future and submit ourselves to it.

We come as individual followers of Jesus Christ. We come from multiple countries, multiple regions, multiple congregations, with vast differences in our stories, our experiences, our perspectives, and our convictions. If we were not united by our faith in Jesus Christ, it would be easy to allow our differences to define and divide us.

As we stand together on the precipice of the unknown, invited to journey into the 2017 General Synod of the RCA, some have come with anticipated outcomes. Some have brought clear expectations. Some have laid out a predictable pathway. Others have offered openness to a spiritual direction that is mysterious and unidentified. All are true until the conversation and deliberation begins.

Leading up to this year's General Synod, we have searched for solace by grasping at places of assurance and comfort. Some have searched in our history, recognizing points of contention in our past and identifying them as greater or more difficult than today so that we can push forward with certainty and minimal challenge in our present state. We have searched in our polity, recognizing that our order has allowed us to function rightly for centuries and will provide the continued guidance necessary to navigate our current contentiousness. We have searched in our theology, recognizing that our identity as Reformed places a greater burden on God than on us, and we can trust in God's providential action on our behalf.

Others have achieved a sense of equilibrium through lament for what was. They are identifying the pain and discomfort of our world today, both inside and outside the church, and hoping for a change that would make the future more like the past—a place of simpler times, simpler decisions, and less complicated interactions and issues.

We cannot look backward, making an assumption that "what was" and "what is" will easily become "what will be." We cannot accept "what is" as the way things will always be, either. We must recognize our own placement and responsibility in submitting to and serving Jesus Christ. We must recognize the obligation we have been given as the people of God to be the church—to ensure this church goes forward as a light to the world and as a communicator of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

On March 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln stood before a divided nation and gave what many believe was his greatest speech: his second inaugural address.

The Civil War was in full swing, though many could see its inevitable conclusion. Years of tumult and war and the burden of leadership in the midst of this conflict brought President Lincoln to the root of what was important in moving forward as a United States of America.

He did not communicate a spirit of vindication or triumphalism but laid out hope founded upon humility.

In the brevity of only 701 words, President Lincoln initiated a future peace that would come through reconciliation. Rather than rally the troops to support the war, Lincoln called for all to imitate the ways of God. His final words from this address were simply:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

It was not a rationale to be used as the hand of God in a situation of right and wrong or good and evil. It was a call to rightness, a deeper righteousness. It recognized that knowing right or being right was truly acting right.

It is at this crossroads we stand today, my RCA sisters and brothers. In our own recognition that we stand at reconciliation and division.

Another of Abraham Lincoln's speeches, given prior to the conflict and contention of the Civil War, better reflects this time and this metaphor. On June 16, 1858, upon becoming the Republican senatorial candidate for the state of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln gave an acceptance speech in which he said:

'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.

Lincoln took the words of Jesus from Matthew 12:25 (NIV): "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."

We stand at a place where we might audaciously believe that we can divide and endure. That we can achieve something that Jesus says is incapable of being accomplished: division without destruction.

The weight of the Office of the General Secretary is carrying the burden of understanding that you live and lead not out of a personal preference or perspective but out of a historical one. You make decisions that encompass the good of the whole, rather than what might be for your own benefit or for the good of only a few. You recognize that responsibility is both affliction and liability, and you have said "yes" to carrying it with integrity and humility.

Many of us by birth have been born into this house called the RCA. Others have been adopted into it. All of us have recognized our holy covenant with God—that he is our God, and we are his people—and have committed ourselves to life in the family.

As Reformed Christians, we acknowledge the foreordination of God in our salvation but also in our living as part of a connected body of Christ, the church, and the church that God has placed us in, called the Reformed Church in America. You are not here by accident but by God's ordained purpose—for his purposes, not your own, and for his glory.

Yet today is a different day. And the words of Jesus are still true: a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Christianity is not lived in a vacuum; it is lived in relationship. It is lived with others, and it is incapable of existing without community. In standing in this different day, some see the unity of the body of Christ as an idol that is only unity for the sake of unity. Others see unity as a preferred place that is greater than purity and peace.

As you read Scripture with a bent toward covenant, relationship, and unity, you recognize God's heart for all God's children to not just exist together and not just live together, but to love one another deeply, and out of that relationship to engage in a redemptive mission that is a witness to the whole world.

An unwillingness to be the church—the called-out ones together—is not God's design for his family, and our choices and decisions to break up the body of Christ and not live united are sinful. Our humanity and our sinfulness get in the way of God's redemption story.

The apostle Paul rebukes the church at Corinth because of their divisive and schismatic relationships and actions while trying to be a witness to the world for Jesus Christ and to bring transformation into the lives of the broken, the helpless, and the hurting.

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (TLB):

But, dear brothers, I beg you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so that there won't be splits in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. For some of those who live at Chloe's house have told me of your arguments and quarrels, dear brothers. Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul"; and others say that they are for Apollos or for Peter; and some that they alone are the true followers of Christ. And so, in effect, you have broken Christ into many pieces.

Are we any different today? Future generations will view the sin of our disunity and recognize how we are dishonoring God—just like the church at Corinth. Even if we do it in defense of the marginalized or in advocating for truth, rationalizing the reason for behavior does not excuse the behavior itself. We still stand on the brink of breaking Christ into many pieces. How can we say that is God glorifying and God's desire for the Reformed Church in America? We are trying to perpetuate a new narrative—out of our anxiety and fear—that division is the call God has laid before us as a denomination. This is not the gospel. To believe division is the way forward is to believe that a tattered relic of Christ is the same as experiencing the true fullness and reconciliation of Jesus.

For this reason, I bring a proposal before you, the 2017 General Synod. It is a simple proposal and recommendation, and it is the only recommendation of my tenure as general secretary. It is with the hope of deepening our relationships and of defining what is most important and how we move forward together as a church, unified for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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To request that each classis and regional synod engage in discussion at its next stated meeting around the future of the Reformed Church in America in light of our current state of contention and division, exploring the biblical vision of a covenant people and a church united in mission, recognizing that a church divided is not God's intention for his people and is not a redemptive witness to our world.

The discussion should be developed by the interim general secretary, in conjunction with regional executives and a small group of pastors and elders, and should include the following questions:

1. How do we understand the biblical calling to live together in a unity of fellowship and love for one another?
2. Are we willing to see the Reformed Church in America embark on a serious division and break of fellowship, and what is our part in bringing reconciliation and restoration?
3. What do we believe is God's intended future for the Reformed Church in America?

The results of this conversation should be shared with the 2018 General Synod by the interim general secretary, with appropriate next steps identified.

The process should be grounded in prayer, be focused on Scripture, and provide an environment for authentic and honest discussion within our assemblies and with one another that effectively deepens our relationship and love for one another and strengthens our witness in the world.

The movement that we are a part of began in 1628. It is a movement of God's people who have been called by God to be the church and to share the gospel in our world. It has been our calling for centuries and has been passed down to us with great fervor and great responsibility.

Pastoral and church leaders have willingly accepted the baton of leadership and have cultivated a next generation to receive it and run with perseverance and endurance the race that has been set before us. Each generation makes its own choice, but it is one that has been influenced by the Holy Spirit's presence and power. Each generation identifies its place in history and acknowledges the historical significance of the time and place to which they have been assigned—the part of the harvest in which they toil.

As we minister in a different day, I see many who no longer see the spiritual and historical weight of their ministry assignment but instead embrace a personal perspective. From this position, we tend to overestimate our accomplishment and contribution, and underestimate the sacrifice, commitment, value, and contribution of those who came before us. We think we are self made, when in reality, we all stand on the shoulders of somebody—usually multiple somebodies. Our gifts, skills, and passions are God-given blessings, and we have been tasked with using them to bless others as we live out God's call on our lives and on our leadership.

When I stand on the steps of a church in Xiamen, China, and read a plaque that says, "The first Protestant Church in China," knowing that church was started by David Abeel, an RCA missionary, I think of the tens of millions of Christians worshiping today as followers of Jesus Christ in China and recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I sit in the palace of the King of Bahrain or in the royal court of the Sultan of Oman and know I am there because of the sacrifice of Samuel Zwemer, who moved into the *souk* in Bahrain in 1890 and began dispensing medicine as an opening to dispense the truth of the gospel, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I stand in the commons of a school in Madanapalle, India, or the emergency room of a hospital in Vellore named after Ida Scudder—an RCA missionary who devoted her life to improving the quality of life of women and children and to sharing Christ's love in tangible ways in India—I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I worship in a church in South Korea, knowing that the spiritual lineage of these Korean Christians is traced to Horace Underwood, a graduate of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I gather under a tree on the African plain in Kenya and see dozens of Maasai people who have water because of a well provided by RCA churches and missionaries, a school, and a weekly gathering of a new church that is impacting people for eternity, I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

When I see a church in the Hudson Valley that had a vision for church planting—not in the 21st century but in the 17th century—I am able to see church after church that owes its birth to that visionary congregation. And from that lineage, I see a new church focused especially on people who have disabilities, welcoming all people with open arms in the name of Jesus, and I recognize the legacy of leadership we have been handed.

It is a legacy we continue to carry through Transformed & Transforming. Six years ago, we didn't know what would happen to the Reformed Church in America as we transitioned from one call—Our Call—to the new direction that the Holy Spirit was leading us. Transformed & Transforming was a bold initiative that required the upheaval of an already existing institution.

When we first started the process of transition, we began to wonder how to best listen, learn, love, and lead. In our first year of discernment together, we recognized that God was leading the RCA toward three strategic priority areas:

- Cultivating transformation in Christ
- Equipping emerging leaders of today and tomorrow
- Engaging in Christ's kingdom mission

Following two years of discernment—with thousands of participants and multiple gatherings for conversations, prayer, and reflection—we began laying out a strategic plan to help us realize this God-given vision. It required staff and team transitions, establishing church commitment and support, moving from an institutional to a missional mindset, creating space for leadership development, and working together to more clearly see the vision God had set before us. For is it not God who has sent us?

In this recent chapter of our journey, we have worked to become a denomination that seeks to live and love like Jesus in a world that is entirely different than the one the RCA began in 389 years ago.

Throughout the short period of launching Transformed & Transforming, one thing has been especially clear: The mission of God is our priority, and the vision God has laid before us is still about living and loving like Jesus.

Since we first began Transformed & Transforming:

- 417 churches have been involved in connection events.
- 177 churches have engaged in learning communities.
- 46 churches have participated in leadership communities.
- 187 individuals have engaged in leadership collaboratives.
- 498 churches have been involved in Transforming & Transforming overall.

That adds up to transformation that is starting and growing in almost 500 RCA churches. It is transformation that is taking root in the lives of our congregations and community members. It is transformation in our leadership teams and in our discipleship relationships. It is transformation around gender, disability, and racial reconciliation. It is transformation in the lives of our global partners and those we serve together. It is transformation in the lives of the next generation. It is transformation toward increasingly living and loving like Jesus as the Holy Spirit leads us deeper into ministry together.

And it is not transformation for transformation's sake. Rather, this vision of transformation is one that has been historically sown in our DNA as the Reformed Church in America, and it is the leadership legacy with which we have been entrusted.

On the RCA website, [www.rca.org](http://www.rca.org), you'll find an "about" section. In that section, you'll read:

In this constantly changing world, we like to say we're "reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God." We embrace fresh ideas and hold on to what's best about our deep, rich past. (We need almost 400 candles to light our birthday cake!)

We seek transformation because it's who we've always been. We understand transformation as our vision because Jesus gathered his disciples together, saying: Go to the ends of the earth, baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we seek transformation, still in our world today, because we proclaim the relevancy of the gospel that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. We believe that this is still just as current today as it was thousands of years ago. And we believe it because Scripture, the Word of God, claims it to be true.

Today, as the Reformed Church in America, we carry with us a vision that has become sharp and clear from the moment Christ ascended to the throne, sending the Holy Spirit upon us. Our vision is to continue engaging in transformation as Christ continues to transform lives in our world today. Our vision is to live and love like Jesus to the greatest extent we are able, as we invest all of ourselves and all of our resources in this effort that God has called and entrusted to us.

What is God doing as we take the first steps into this new chapter?

Let me share a few glimpses of God at work in the RCA ...

In the priority area of discipleship, led by Jill Ver Steeg:

- 13 RCA congregations in places like Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Okoboji, Iowa; and Edmonds, Washington; have participated in 3DM learning communities.
- Eight Faithwalking retreats, held in conjunction with Western Theological Seminary and Ridder Church Renewal, have included 25 RCA congregations in the classes of Canadian Prairies, Albany, Wisconsin, and New York.

In the priority area of leadership, led by Eddy Alemán:

- Four African American RCA congregations in New York are participating in a two-year leadership community.
- Six churches in Detroit and five Hispanic congregations in West Michigan are also engaged in two leadership development learning communities.
- Andy Bossardet is helping lead the efforts of Ridder Church Renewal, in partnership with Western Theological Seminary and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). We have 112 pastors from 96 congregations involved in ten learning communities so far.
- The Women's Transformation and Leadership initiative, led by Liz Testa, launched six 18-month leadership collaboratives in February, cultivating the leadership gifts and contributions of women who are leaders in the RCA.

Our mission priority area is led by Tony Campbell and is also engaging in some awesome ways:

- Local Missional Engagement, led by Eliza Cortés Bast, is taking RCA churches through a learning lab process to discover how to build a bridge from a congregation to a community. It is focused on education in Chicago, affordable housing in Holland, Michigan, and math tutoring in Wyoming, Michigan. In partnership with church plants and church planters, this initiative is thinking outside the box about new ways for missional engagement locally.
- Global Missional Engagement, led by Megan Hodgins, has held five connection events that have engaged 20 congregations across the United States and Canada. 140 individuals are participating in an online network to focus on our strategic impact area of Nicaragua.
- Volunteer Engagement, led by Stephanie Soderstrom, helped 1,117 volunteers serve with RCA missionaries and mission partners in the past year. 332 young leaders were awarded scholarships toward their volunteer experiences through the gracious generosity of the Church Growth Fund.
- Terry DeYoung is providing leadership to our Disabilities Concerns initiative. We are seeing an ever-increasing community of disability advocates, with 25 trained in the past year and an expectation of adding even more advocates who can help train churches in dismantling physical and communication barriers so that they can become inclusive and welcome all God's people.
- The Church Multiplication initiative, led by Randy Weener, Mike Hayes, and Tim Vink, has seen 61 new church starts organize since the beginning of Transformed & Transforming.
- Missional Mosaic, led by Earl James, has started two learning communities to help equip congregations in the area of cultural agility. In March, 55 people participated in a summit on mass incarceration in Chicago that is giving birth to a new learning community to help churches minister to this marginalized population.

And in the area of Next Generation Engagement, led by Rick Zomer, I'm especially encouraged. We are passionate about passing on faith and mission to millennials and emerging adults and desire for this area to permeate all three of our strategic priorities:

- 18 churches participated in two connection events in Wisconsin, seven churches were part of a connection event in Des Moines, Iowa, and eight churches attended a connection event in Sioux Center, Iowa.
- Six RCA churches in Canada are involved in a learning circle utilizing Fuller Youth Institute resources.
- Additional RCA churches are working to understand the emerging adults' context and what next steps look like for their church to reach out and minister to the next generation.

This is the impact of God's vision and our mission: to seek out transformation through living and loving like Jesus. And as we seek to do this, we hope to take the most people along with us. You'll hear more of the stories tomorrow night as we provide a greater update of Transformed & Transforming. Seeing up close and personal how God is at work in and through the RCA is wonderful and amazing. Today, you can find our Transformed & Transforming initiative leaders in their black or gray shirts. Ask them about their amazing stories of transformation.

I am grateful for our RCA staff who have worked so hard to make words on a page come alive and to imagine, conceive, strategize, and plan processes that are equipping congregations for mission. We have an awesome team—operationally and missionally—who are giving all of themselves for the mission God has called us to together. And I am proud of all they have accomplished for God's glory.

I am especially grateful to Ken Neevel and the entire development team for fully raising the resource goal of Called: The Campaign for Transformed & Transforming. We have contributions and commitments of more than \$6.5 million dollars! Reaching this goal means that we as a denomination can continue to learn, lead, and explore the vision of God, living and loving like Jesus through discipleship, leadership, mission, and next generation engagement. This is the impact of the vision, and we are grateful to the many who have believed in this vision and who have committed to this vision not for their own gain but for the sake of others.

I believe this must continue to be a priority for the RCA. It's why we've invested so much into the future of our ministry and the equipping of future leaders. And there are other mile markers on the RCA journey into the future, indicators and guides for where the RCA could and should go moving forward. Here are some things I hope to see as I continue to serve as a minister of Word and sacrament in the RCA:

- Never stop living and loving like Jesus—let the light of Christ shine in your hearts; make his love real, authentic, and tangible.
- In a changing world, remain on course to be a denomination that is moving missionally, not institutionally.
- Equip churches to start with a ministry orientation that is toward the outsider, not the insider.
- Let the center of transformational mission be focused on discipleship, leadership, and mission that are motivated toward the next generation.



- Recognize that the future of the RCA is one that moves beyond history and heritage and provides value-added equipping that helps churches to realize God's call for their congregation within their context.
- Transition to an assessment system that is based on giving shared by all and for all, and envision how, together, all of us can do more than any single church is capable of alone.
- Train seminary students for today's reality; in a world that has questions and doubts and is seeking the mystery and power of a resurrected Jesus Christ, raise up a generation of missionaries who can translate the gospel for today's culture.
- Provide large entryways for the diverse student body of NBTS to become a part of a diverse RCA that reflects the new world around us. Recruit them and welcome them openly—they are already being trained in our seminary; we must include them in our pulpits and communities to help us become the multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic denomination God is moving us toward.
- Support generously the work of Global Mission—this is a place of significant influence for the kingdom—personally investing in mission that is making a difference globally.
- Use our confessions to interpret Scripture. This is where our history serves us—our commitment to creeds and confessions and the theological understanding of those who have come before us will provide guidance through the illumination of the Holy Spirit to the grace and truth of God's Word.
- Continue to have a transformational vision for the least and the lost—the uniqueness of the RCA has been an understanding of the gospel that is holistic, bringing restoration and reconciliation to all.
- Elders, challenge your pastor to have a weekly spiritual conversation with someone who is far from God; pay for them to hang out at a local coffee shop so that they might strike up a spiritual conversation with a seeker. See how the Holy Spirit draws people who need transformation to experience it through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ; it is the first step in living and loving like Jesus.
- Lean into our relationship with the CRCNA. See it for what it can be: two denominations who separated and who are closer together than ever before and can provide more than cooperation and collaboration in envisioning a new creation that is a greater Reformed witness in our world.
- Commit to reconciliation.

In the midst of this supernatural working of God in and through us, a shadow hangs over us, darkening the light of Christ that is so bright and expansive. It is a shadow that comes from the powers and principalities that battle against our transformational mission and efforts. And it comes from our own lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. It comes as we impose our own personal preferences and perspectives on God's leading for us as a church on mission and in mission.

Reconciliation is at the heart of transformation.

When we read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and experience the transformation of becoming a new creation, it is in the context of reconciliation. God is the initiator of reconciliation through Jesus Christ and gives to us the ministry of reconciliation.

How do we think we can reconcile a lost world to God, when we cannot even be reconciled to each other? We are a true house divided.

The message of the gospel is a message of reconciliation. The ministry of the gospel is a ministry of reconciliation. The preaching of the gospel is a word of reconciliation.

The design of the gospel is so that those who receive it are reconciled to God. The basic meaning of the word reconcile is to remove enmity between two enemy parties or to change thoroughly. If we are a denomination that has experienced transformation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ—if we are a denomination that seeks to bring transformation into our world through the gospel, if we are a denomination that desires to share a reconciling gospel that invites people into a life-giving relationship with God—and we cannot be reconciled one to another, where is the power of our gospel?

If we preach a message on the power of God to change lives and see reconciliation as the changing of our relationship with God—from enmity to favored relationship—and we cannot experience a reconciled relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ, part of God's covenant people in the Reformed Church in America—what testimony and hope do we give to a searching and hopeless world?

In Greek, the meaning of reconciliation at its root is change. This is the meaning of the word we read in the New Testament. It is a word, according to Greek scholars, that means primarily to exchange—to change the relation of hostile parties into a relation of peace.

This is my final word as general secretary. Live the truth of God's Word. Live the grace of God's Word. Be transformed. Be changed. Be reconciled. Show how Christians live differently. Do not accept the polarization that is multiplying and expanding in our world. Do not allow it to influence our relationships with one another. We are called to be different, to act different, and to live different—to live and love like Jesus.

Living and loving like Jesus isn't asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" in our interactions with one another this week. It is asking, "What did Jesus do?" He brought reconciliation and transformation into our world, and how can we live and love like Jesus? How does this impact what we say, how we interact, how we treat one another, and how we testify to the power of the gospel? The impact is directed toward each other first and then spreads into our communities and into our world.

Jim Poit is a good friend and pastor from Gilbert, Arizona. Our lives and ministries have intersected and crossed paths for almost 20 years—since he was pastoring an RCA church in Princeton, New Jersey. Last month, we were together serving on the board of trustees for Western Theological Seminary. He updated me on his daughter Elizabeth, who had just graduated from college. Last year, she was part of the Call Waiting experience for young leaders at General Synod.

Jim told me at the end of General Synod last year that Elizabeth had no desire to return this year. Her description of synod was of people bickering and quarreling and fighting to break apart. This year, at graduation, Jim shared that he would be at synod this year and wondered how Elizabeth felt about it a year later. She said, "After reflecting on it throughout the year, I realize that General Synod was not an experience of people fighting to break apart, but now I see it as people who were fighting to stay together."

Friends, that is the challenge before us. It is a position and disposition we take before we ever walk into the room to meet together. Do we have the will to be reconciled together? Will we contest the adversary, who wills to tear us apart? Or do we see this as a contest of winners and

losers? Are we willing to change and be reconciled to one another? Will we grow together and go together in mission, or will we abandon our covenantal commitments and go our own way? If we live and love like Jesus this week, we cannot help but be reconcilers—to God, with each other, and in our world.